City officials exploring cleanup changes

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NEW BEDFORD — Right now, the ongoing Superfund cleanup of PCBs and other industrial contaminants in New Bedford Harbor is projected to take 38 years and cost $570 million — not taking into account inflation or other impediments.

But city officials — with qualified support of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency — are promoting a major shift in cleanup technology to potentially cut hundreds of millions of dollars and save decades.

In addition, officials said last week, by shifting technologies, two valuable pieces of property being used by EPA would be returned to the city for development.

Mayor Scott W. Lang has been the primary force in trying to bring about the change, officials said, and the mayor continues to push the process along.

The EPA is spending $15 million a year — 90 percent federal and 10 percent state money — to suck contaminated sediment off the bottom of the harbor, sort and filter it and send clean water back into the harbor. The contaminated material is packaged in special containers that are shipped by rail to a PCB disposal facility in Michigan.

On the current schedule and budget, the project will take 38 years to complete.

Instead, the city is pushing EPA to switch to a process known as "confined aquatic disposal," in which giant pits are dug in the harbor bottom into which polluted materials are placed and covered.

CAD cell disposal has been successful in a number of New England harbors, including Boston and Providence, and is under way in New Bedford Harbor for navigational dredging — a project that involves contamination including PCBs, but at a level that does not rise to that of a Superfund site.

City officials believe CAD cell technology can be used for the Superfund cleanup, dramatically reducing cost and time and increasing safety and public health.

The EPA has responded largely favorably to the proposed change, and officials from New Bedford and EPA describe a cooperative relationship.

The EPA has stopped short of endorsing the process, however, because disposing of PCBs — polychlorinated byphenyls used in manufacturing before being banned for health reasons — have not traditionally been disposed of in CAD cells.

The EPA has to put the idea through an "evaluation process" and a "public process" before it can publicly commit to it, officials said. The evaluation process is under way.

In the meantime, people interested in New Bedford Harbor can learn about the status of the Superfund cleanup and CAD cell technology in public meetings. EPA officials discussed the possibility of using new technology at a meeting last summer. Another joint EPA-city public meeting is scheduled from 7

to 9 p.m. Oct. 30 at the New Bedford Free Public Library.

Jeanethe Falvey, EPA spokeswoman for New England, said a major reason for the length of the decades-long plan for the Superfund cleanup in the harbor was a cut in EPA funding years ago from an originally planned $80 million to $15 million a year. That stretched the project from about a decade to four decades.

"The only reason we have hesitated" on CAD cell technology for disposal, Ms. Falvey said, is "We want to make sure we have public support for a new procedure for Superfund material."

Ms. Falvey described the current process as using a "dredge-like vacuum, with big pipes along the harbor bottom" sending material through an underwater pipeline to a de-sanding facility on land where the coarser sand is separated from the silt. Because the PCBs "like to stick to the silt," the silt is sent from the de-sanding facility to a de-watering facility where the water is squeezed out, cleaned and pumped back into the harbor. The PCB-contaminated "filter cake" material is stockpiled, put in containers and shipped to Michigan, where it is buried in a certified PCB disposal facility.

Ms. Falvey described CAD cell technology as involving digging a deep hole in the harbor bottom, placing the contaminated material into it and covering it with a layer of non-contaminated material.

An important point, Ms. Falvey said, is that the CAD cell is left with a concave top — like a hollow dish. That is intended to have the water action in the harbor continuously fill in the top of the CAD cell, providing additional clean fill as time goes on. Ms. Falvey said that creates an ongoing process of adding cover to the CAD cell.

David Dickerson, co-project manager for the EPA New England region, said the potential savings could be very large, but the time saved might be only 15 years depending on a number of factors. Mr. Dickerson said the EPA "does not want to be presumptive" about the CAD cell technology or benefits and will move along at a measured pace. "We need to dot the i's and cross the t's. We want to be as transparent as we can," he said.

Port Director Kristin Decas said New Bedford — similar to most ports in the United States — is always looking for ways to make more waterfront space available for expansion. She said by getting the EPA to switch technology on the cleanup, the EPA would move operations off sites on the Upper Harbor above Fairhaven Mills and on the working waterfront above Route 6 and below Interstate 195.

The site above Fairhaven Mills could then be used for waterfront access and tied to a larger-scale project in the area, Ms. Decas said. The working waterfront site has bulkheads and rail and would make an ideal intermodal transportation center, Ms. Decas said. "These are tremendous assets that could come on line" for the city," she said.

Mayor Lang said when the city gave the EPA a decades-long lease on property it is using for the Superfund cleanup, it "did not have a vision for Fairhaven Mills and riverfront development. The EPA is sitting in areas that are extremely important to the city. There is no need for land-based, outdated technology. We need to begin thinking about economic development on the land."

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